

Spread of Islam in West Africa (part 2 of 3): The Empires of Mali and Songhay

Description: How Islam spread into sub-Saharan region of West Africa, and the great civilizations it established there, taking its inhabitants out of paganism to the worship of One God. Part 2: A history of the empires of Mali and Songhay.

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Category: [Articles](#) > [Islamic History](#) > [In Detail](#)

Islam in the Empire of Mali

The influence of Islam in Mali dates back to the 15th century when Al-Bakri mentions the conversion of its ruler to Islam. There was a miserable period of drought which came to an end by offering Muslim prayers and ablutions. The Empire of Mali arose from the ruins of Ghana Empire. There are two important names in the history of Islam in Mali: Sundiata (1230-1255) and Mansa Musa (1312-1337). Sundiata is the founder of the Mali Empire but was a weak Muslim, since he practiced Islam with syncretic practices and was highly disliked by the scholars. Mansa Musa was, on the other hand, a devout Muslim and is considered to be the real architect of the Mali Empire. By the time Sundiata died in 1255, a large number of former dependencies of Ghana also came under his power. After him came Mansa Uli (1255-1270) who had made a pilgrimage to Makkah.

Mansa (Emperor) Musa came to power in 1312 and his fame reached beyond the Sudan, North Africa and spread up to Europe. Mansa Musa ruled from 1312 to 1337 and in 1324-25 he made his famous pilgrimage to Makkah [Hajj]. When he returned from his pilgrimage, he brought with him a large number of Muslim scholars and architects who built five mosques for the first time with baked bricks. Thus Islam received its greatest boost during Mansa Musa's reign. Many scholars agree that because of his attachment to Islam, Mansa Musa could introduce new ideas to his administration. The famous traveller and scholar Ibn Batutah came to Mali during Mansa Sulaiman's reign (1341-1360), and gives an excellent account of Mali's government and its economic prosperity - in fact, a legacy of Mansa Musa's policy. Mansa Musa's pilgrimage projected Mali's enormous wealth and potentialities which attracted more and more Muslim traders and scholars. These Muslim scholars and traders contributed to the cultural and economic development of Mali. It was during his reign that diplomatic relations were established with Tunis and Egypt, and thus Mali began to appear on the map of the world.

Islam in the Empire of Songhay

Islam began to spread in the Empire of Songhay some time in the 11th century when the ruling Za or Dia dynasty first accepted it. It was a prosperous region because of its booming trade with Gao. By the 13th century it had come under the dominion of the Mali

Empire but had freed itself by the end of the 14th century when the dynasty was renamed Sunni. The frontier of Songhay now expanded and in the 15th century, under the leadership of Sunni 'Ali, who ruled between 1464-1492, the most important towns of the Western Sudan came under the Songhay Empire. The great cities of Islamic learning like Timbuktu and Jenne came under his power between 1471-1476.

Sunni 'Ali's was a nominal Muslim who used Islam to his ends. He even persecuted Muslim scholars and practiced local cults and magic. When the famous scholar Al-Maghilli called him a pagan, he punished him too. The belief in cults and magic was, however, not something new in Songhay. It existed in other parts of West Africa until the time the revivalist movements gained momentum in the 18th century. It is said of Sunni 'Ali that he tried to compromise between paganism and Islam although he prayed and fasted. The scholars called it merely a mockery.

Sunni 'Ali's syncretism was soon challenged by the Muslim elites and scholars in Timbuktu, which was then a center of Islamic learning and civilization. The famous family of Agit, of the Berber scholars, had the post of the Chief Justice and were known for their fearless opposition to the rulers. In his lifetime, Sunni 'Ali took measures against the scholars of Timbuktu (in 1469 and in 1486). But on his death, the situation completely changed: Islam and Muslim scholars triumphed. Muhammad Toure (Towri), a military commander asked Sunni 'Ali's successor, Sunni Barou, to appear before the public and make an open confession of his faith in Islam. When Barou refused to do so, Muhammad Toure ousted him and established a new dynasty in his own name, called the Askiya dynasty. Sunni 'Ali may be compared with Sundiata of Mali, and Askiya Muhammad Toure with Mansa Musa, a champion of the cause of Islam.

On his coming to power, he established Islamic law and arranged a large number of Muslims to be trained as judges. He gave his munificent patronage to the scholars and gave them large pieces of land as gifts. He became a great friend of the famous scholar Muhammad Al-Maghilli. It was because of his patronage that eminent Muslim scholars were attracted to Timbuktu, which became a great seat of learning in the 16th century. Timbuktu has the credit of establishing the first Muslim University, called Sankore University, in West Africa; its name is commemorated until today in Ibadan University where a staff residential area has been named as Sankore Avenue.

Like Mansa Musa of Mali, Askia Muhammad Toure went on a pilgrimage and thus came into close contact with Muslim scholars and rulers in the Arab countries. In Makkah, the King accorded him great respect; he was turbaned. The King gave him a sword and the title of the Caliph of the Western Sudan. On his return from Makkah in the year 1497, he proudly used the title of Al-Hajj.

Askia took such a keen interest in the Islamic legal system that he asked a number of questions on Islamic theology from his friend Muhammad al-Maghilli. Al-Maghilli answered his questions in detail which Askia circulated in the Songhay empire. Some of the questions were about the fundamental structure of the faith, such as 'who is a true Muslim?' and "who is a pagan?" When we read Shehu 'Uthman Dan Fodio's works, we can see some of his arguments quoted on the authority of Al-Maghilli. In other words,

Al-Maghilli's detailed discussions of the issues raised by Askiya Muhammad played a great role in influencing Shehu.

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